

Testimony for HB 4131 by Russell Ames, Ph.D.

My name is Dr. Russell Ames, Licensed Psychologist, in Michigan specializing in the treatment of children, adolescents, and their families. I have worked with the psychological problems of families for over 25 years. Today we are here to talk about the special problems of adopted children. It is a well known fact that over 25% of adopted children are receiving mental health services, nationwide. Adopted children, and by inclusion their families, are at much higher risk of requiring mental health services than non-adopted children. Mental health experts have posited many possible explanations for this statistic - a list much too long to expound on here. But, with the adoption of HB 4131 we can remove one possible reason for this high rate of mental health referrals - a vulnerable family system created because one "parent" of an unmarried couple cannot receive full adoptive rights.

House Bill No. 4131 would allow two unmarried people to file a petition for adoption and have both receive legal parental rights to the adopted child.

I know that you have heard and will have heard a great deal about the horror stories and threat to the child who is with the non-legal parent at an emergency room and having critical care services denied because this "parent" does not have legal standing to sign the consent forms. However, the mental health consequences of this inequity may be, and likely are, a much more significant risk to the adopted child.

Thus, I am here to testify about the mental health risk to the child of not having two legally adoptive parents. In this case, we are talking about an unmarried couple committed to each other in a relationship, with both wishing to share equally in the child care and rearing responsibilities and duties.

My testimony is based on a belief that the sanctity and unity of the family unit is essential to the psychological well being of the child. Let's take the perspective of a child adopted into a family of two unmarried, but committed to each other adults - one of whom does not have "legal" standing as a parent. At some point the child learns that he or she is adopted, and as we know, such knowledge leads to questions about family of origin and ultimately to questions of stability and security - could I be abandoned again?

Confusion undermining the child's sense of psychological security is inevitable. First, the six year old is aware that one parent always has to go to Dr's appointments and the other can't go it alone. Next, the child learns more formally, both of us love you equally, but only one is your legal parent. At age 8-12, the child can't understand the formal issue of "State Law" but certainly can relate to the instability and insecurity felt when he or she inevitably wonders what happens to me if the something happens to my "legal parent." Will I be abandoned again? A slippery slope, legal and state approved, right into the mental health system!

We need to stop this unnecessary vulnerability and marginalization of the child and family. We also marginalize the "non-legal" parent. Modern day stressors make it very difficult for any family to remain together as demonstrated by divorce rates over 50%. Despite all the good intentions of the legally-marginalized, non-legal adoptive parent, when times get tough, as they always do, he or she might just take the easy road, opting out of the relationship and child rearing responsibilities since there is no legal bind. Well let's see how much slipperier do we wish to make that path to mental health services?

For the welfare of the child and the family, I urge you to support HB 4131.

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